

Including Children with SEN in a Mainstream setting

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[A presentation to colleagues at an Oldham S.E.N. Conference - 2000 from the staff at Werneth Infant School. (Pupils at the school come from diverse backgrounds and the majority are bilingual)]

We were asked to share with you our strategies for working with children with Special Educational needs within a mainstream school.

Schools are unique, individual, complex organisations and our systems and practices, which have grown and developed over a long time, will not necessarily fit and transpose directly to another organisation.

So, what we have tried to do is identify the aspects of our work in school, which we believe, contribute to the way we respond to the individual needs of the children. Just working on this presentation together has encouraged us to be reflective about what we do and opportunities like this help us to focus and clarify our thoughts. Of course we continue to learn and develop our practices all the time - it's what brings us together today - we are all here because we are "reflective practitioners" we are interested in doing the very best for all the children with whom we work.

Quote " We approach the social world of the classroom with the view that what happens there is teaching and learning but this is only part of the story. What happens in classrooms is living" S McLean

I think that the word 'teacher' is a poor one for describing what we do because it reinforces the notion of a transmission model of learning.... one where we know, and the children don't, but they will, when we've told them!

It links in with the notion of DELIVERING the National Curriculum - again it sounds as if knowledge is what we are about and children are the empty vessels to be filled.

This quotation, from Holt in Cathy Nutbrown's Treads of Thinking, I think sums up the lack of real knowledge about education possessed by many government ministers.

Quote

Down the conveyor belts come rows of empty containers of sundry shapes and sizes. Beside the belts is an array of pouring and squirting devises, controlled by employees of the factory. As the containers go by, these workers squirt various amounts of different substances - reading, spelling, math, history, science - into the containers.

Upstairs, management decides when the containers should be put on the belt, how long they should be left on, what kinds of materials should be poured or squirted into them and at what times, and what should be done about containers whose openings seem to be smaller than others, or seem to have no openings at all.

Holt 1991

I think our starting point, both in school, and for us today, has to be to establish what we mean by education and to identify our basic beliefs about how children learn and how we work together to create an environment and learning experiences which support the children's needs.

I'm going to start with the theory behind our work and these are the strands or aspects of our practise that we are going to look at.

The theoretical framework upon which we base our work.

Staff development

Work with other agencies

Work with parents

The curriculum

Organisation and Environment

7. Assessment.

These areas are of course interlinked and it is hard to separate them in practice. They are strands or threads which are closely woven together.

THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

At college we studied child development in depth and the idea of thinking about learning processes laid a foundation for what we do. There continues to be a lot of research into how children learn and a growing amount of work on how our brains develop and it is important that we use this knowledge to underpin our work. Our responses to working with children with special educational needs are based on the same beliefs and theoretical framework as for all our children and all staff accept a responsibility for working with those children who have additional needs.

It is from this fundamental basis of knowledge and understanding that we developed the working practices and systems which enable us to respond appropriately, flexibly and, hopefully, effectively to individual children's needs.

I am going to use **Tina Bruce's 10 principles of early childhood education** which we feel describe succinctly our beliefs about early years education.

Tina Bruce is a leading figure in early childhood education and an expert on the principles of learning, she draws heavily on the work of the pioneers of child development work, Froebel, Steiner, Montessori, Piaget, Bruner, Issacs through to more recent and current work by Vygotsky, Gardner, Nutbrown etc.

Ten principles of early childhood education - Bruce 1996.

The best way to prepare children for their adult life is to give them what they need as children.

Children are whole people who have feelings, ideas and relationships with others, and who need to be physically, mentally, morally and spiritually healthy.

Subjects such as mathematics and art cannot be separated; young children learn in an integrated way and not in neat tidy compartments.

Children learn best when they are given appropriate responsibility, allowed to make errors, decisions and choices, and respected as autonomous learners.

Self-discipline is emphasised. Indeed, this is the only kind of discipline worth having. Reward systems are very short-term and do not work in the long-term. Children need their efforts to be valued.

There are times when children are especially able to learn particular things.

What children can do [rather than what they cannot do] is the starting point of a child's education.

Imagination, creativity and all kinds of symbolic behaviour[reading, writing, drawing, dancing, music, mathematical numbers, algebra, role play and talking] develop and emerge when conditions are favourable.

Relationships with other people[both adults and children] are of central importance in a child's life.

Quality education is about three things: the child, the context in which learning takes place, and the knowledge and understanding which the child develops and learns.

This surely emphasises the complexities involved in our work as educational practitioners.

In recent years the focus in education has been on the content - **what** we teach. If this were all education was about, it would be easy to impose a curriculum upon every school to ensure that children all had a complete education.

However - again to use some of Tina Bruce's work to help us illustrate what we know - this is only part of the story. If we are to educate a child effectively we have to consider more than just the content of the curriculum.

Tina Bruce portrays it like this.

Child

The curriculum is made up of 3 parts Child, Content, Context.

The child - the process and structures operating within the child

The context - the people, places, (gender, race, language, SEN)

The content - what the child knows/wants to know/needs to know.

As the head teacher, I believe part of my job is to support staff in addressing new initiatives imposed by government and working them into our systems and practices.

Quote P33 from Recurring Themes in Education

If you are anything at all you are professionals, and if you are not professionals you are no use as educationalists. The teacher who is worth anything is not to be driven, neither is he to be led blindly. He takes the teachings of the highest leaders of thought, but does not interpret them slavishly.

Margaret McMillan

I think that if we are to question the initiatives that are imposed upon us, we have to be clear in our minds about why we question, and be able to express concisely our own philosophy and beliefs.

Quote Christian Schiller

Acts of Parliament change names and they change procedures but they do not change people...

It is people who create or allow change.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

If a school is to work effectively, there must be a consistency of approach. A number of our staff have worked together from some time and this has helped

us to develop a cohesive approach to our work, we work as a team and not in isolation.

We have established a staff library and find - when we have the time! - that what we read can motivate us, help us clarify and articulate our thoughts and obviously extend our knowledge and understanding. When time is short, I pick out "the good bits".

The focus of much of our school based staff development is on "how children learn". As a staff we find the idea of delivering the curriculum anathema and we have used our reading to re-affirm our beliefs and to help us voice our thoughts and concerns about some of the prescriptive edicts cascading down from the government. As more children with SEN are being included within mainstream schools, more specialised courses are available to us. However going on the course is only part of the staff development - we must then share information back at school, work with it and develop and adapt it to meet our needs and the needs of the children. We have also made use of the Internet to provide us with information - particularly on rare disorders such as Praeder willi syndrome.

I recently read an article where the author said we should "write in sand not on stone." I thoroughly agree. There isn't only one way of doing teaching. We are constantly developing our practice, **not** constantly changing because of a new initiative, but starting from where we are and moving on - evolution not revolution.

Chris Woodhead in a recent article, is quoted as saying that "what motivates people is fear of failure" - I think this is quite frightening. I believe that what moves us on is our interest, our enthusiasm, our concern and our care for the children with whom we work - again, that's why we are all here today.

WORKING WITH OTHER PROFESSIONALS.

Part of our work with children with special educational needs involves us not just working collaboratively within school, but with professionals from a range of agencies e.g. Speech and Language Therapists, Occupational therapist's, Physiotherapists, Educational Psychologists, Primary Special Needs Service, Health Visitors and Doctors.

The processes and procedures for working within the Code of Practice have encouraged us and required us to work in partnership. When it works well it's brilliant, but the mechanisms are not always in place and, in certain areas, the goals of professional trust and respect are not in sight and poor communication and poor co-operation work against the needs of the child.

Again - when working with others it is important that our philosophy is explicit and our practices are visible. It is important that a child is not confused by a range of approaches and again I think the code of practice encourages us to maintain effective records of interventions which keep everyone informed. I do think that sometimes school staff are seen as those with least knowledge - not

seen as experts. However, we are experts in education and we often know the children better than anyone save their parents. It is vital that we work to establish a collaborative pattern of working and share and acknowledge the equal, if different, expertise of all involved.

Quote Cathy Nutbrown in Children's Rights and Early Education.

People who work with young children must themselves continue to learn. If they do not continue to read, discuss and to think and keep up to date with current issues, with theory and practise, they show a disrespect for the people they work with, the children and the parents.

WORKING WITH PARENTS

Quote- RSA 1994

Parents are the most important people in their children's lives. It is from parents that children learn the most, particularly in the early months and years...the closer the links between parents and nursery...the more effective that learning becomes.

Quote Athey 1990

Parents and professionals can help children separately or they can work together to the greater benefit of the children.

Working with parents has always been a priority. Parents are the child's first and lasting teachers and have a great knowledge of their children. It is important if we are to respond appropriately to the child, that we have the opportunity to talk about the child and share as much information as we can with the parents and carers.

Once the child is in school, this process is continued. It is important to share information and develop shared understandings of how the child is progressing and how future development can be fostered.

Mechanisms established by the Code of Practice demand that parents are involved in regular review meetings, to focus on the child's needs, to share information and develop strategies together. It is our aim to involve all parents as fully as possible. There are obviously time constraints on both sides and parents have different needs. Some feel more comfortable in school than others, they have different levels of knowledge about how schools work, about the nature and style of teaching and learning. Other parents find it difficult to find time to visit school because of work or family commitments. However, it is important that we build up a sense of trust and understanding if we are to talk openly and honestly about their child's special educational needs.

THE CURRICULUM

As many a Statement of Educational needs says - children have a right to access the National Curriculum, and we are required to deliver it to them as well as we can. This puts the National Curriculum at the centre of what we do. However, if we think back to what Tina Bruce says about the curriculum the National Curriculum is only a part of what we are about. We must not get side tracked into focusing on a narrow band of content

Quote P 190 NC & Early Learning - Gammage.

To be among young children for any length of time, makes one aware of the dangers of seeing curricula or programmes of learning as somehow fashioned outside the children. Rather there is an undeniable pressure that forces one to acknowledge that such children demonstrate vastly different perceptions which greet processes, internalise and make anew any ideas provided by the teacher. This means that the teacher cannot wholly structure, deliver or create the precise chains of knowledge. It means that he or she may have to link ideas with great subtlety, to follow red herrings, to play alongside, to observe carefully, to abandon certain threads of exposition and to search for others.

Gammage 1992

It is important that we see the curriculum as based on a developmental approach - focusing on processes as much as products. In this way, it is more adaptable, more flexible, more responsive and therefore more suited to differentiation and therefore more inclusive.

The curriculum should be matched to the interests of the child and take into account individual needs in terms of learning style and stage of development. Often the children with special educational needs - because of the focus on targets and small steps etc. can find themselves with such a tightly structured curriculum that there is no room for us to observe their individual preferences.

Quote

Not all learning is the result of adult planning and intervention. Important incidental learning can take place in response to the opportunity to be part of the school community. It is the role of the teacher to recognise, value and support this learning as it emerges.

Drummond 1993. P61 Child rights

Quote L. Malaguzzi ...

What children learn does not follow as an automatic result from what is taught, Rather, it is in large part due to the children's own doing, as a consequence of their activities and our resources.

It is important that children have time and space to set their own agenda. We try to ensure that the skills, concepts and knowledge we are working to develop with the children, are presented in such a way that they are

meaningful and accessible to the child - embedded in a familiar context - this would be difficult if we slavishly followed the National Curriculum.

In addition the style of delivery is also becoming more defined if we are to follow advice from government. This again can restrict access to children with special educational needs. What we need to do is open as many windows on the same concept as possible for a child. Howard Gardener's work on multiple intelligences provide lots of support for this notion that we all learn in different ways. He says "Education when it is done well turns out to be amazingly complex, intricate and subtle"

We acknowledge that children will need to access the curriculum in a variety of ways and to this end we place a great emphasis within school on the provision for play and place it at the centre of our curriculum planning throughout school.

In the nursery the children have continual access to a range of play activities and situations.... Some are initiated by adults, some are initiated by children, and some of these are developed with support and intervention by adults.

In the reception class the day is more structured in terms of timetabling but each day children have access to the play situations and again there are opportunities to join in both structured and open ended play activities.

By the time the children are in Years 1 & 2 the children will have time in play 2 or 3 times a week. There is a balanced approach with some structured provision which links with areas of learning being developed in the classroom and also opportunities for children to follow their own agenda. As research suggests it is often in the play situation that children function at their highest level. It is where we observe children, who find it difficult to focus and concentrate when directed to activities by an adult within a structured classroom environment, actually, on self initiated activities, remain focused for extended periods, often co-operating with their peers, asking advice and in fact showing many of the characteristics of effective learning.

Quote P61 Children's Rights - Nutbrown

If children find learning difficult, it could well be that there is something wrong with the way we are asking them to learn.

In the play situation children have the opportunity to combine their interests, knowledge and skills often in a social context - unlike much of the individual work that goes on in the classroom. The children have the opportunity to try ideas out and not worry about a response being wrong, they have a chance to "wallow" in their achievements.

Quote Guba P33 N.C. and Early Years re play

To give time for play in school is not to give a break or a rest from learning; it is not a concession to immature minds. Rather it is a way of making teaching

and learning more productive... We do not know what the knowledge is and the skills are, that the children of today will most need in the future. Flexibility, confidence and the ability to think for oneself - these are the attributes one hopes will not let them down. If play is conducive to the development of these, we had better have it in the school.

ORANISATION AND ENVIRONMENT

We are very lucky to work in a school that we helped to design and feel it both reflects and supports our philosophy and ethos. It is an open plan design which encourages and enables us to work co-operatively and openly, to share good practice, to make the most of people's strengths and to support each other in developing new skills.

We are a two-form entry school and each year group works together sharing support staff. All staff have the opportunity to work in the different areas of the classroom, able to present activities in different settings and able to observe the children in different settings. The Year 1 & 2 children, although with individual class bases, share access to craft and play activities. Timetabling is both complex and flexible, enabling us to change the way the children work to meet their changing needs.

The introduction of the literacy and numeracy strategies has caused us to think very carefully about the use of our resources in terms of people, equipment and space. Although we cover the requirement of the strategy in terms of individual elements, the children access them in a variety of ways. It is, therefore, easier to address the issues of differentiation and to include children with special educational needs. It is not always easy, but we try to ensure that we match our provision to the child and not fit the child to the provision.

I'm very partial to analogies that compare child development to horticulture! This is a favourite.

Quote p100 R. Themes Priestman

The aim is for...

children to grow like flowers in a garden, tended, nurtured, pruned when necessary, not forced as hot house flowers not allowed to run wild as weeds, but each growing strong and sturdy to enjoy sun, wind and rain. The rose should not strive to become a lily, nor the violet to emulate the clematis, but each should be as fair as possible in their own way and play his or her own part in making the garden.

Priestman 1946

We all accept that different plants require different growing conditions - we try and make this so for the children (and the staff) within school.

ASSESSMENT

Quote Elliott Eisner p93

"Our nets define what we shall catch."

There has been a huge focus on assessment in recent years and assessment is a key part of the educational process. However, rigid assessment can lead to rigid teaching and I believe we are being pushed down the road where the nature of the testing is defining our teaching content and style.

Quote Michael Rosen p51 Children's Rights.

We use the same word for the educational process as we do for horse racing - a course; a predetermined sequence of obstacles that will be negotiated by all participants; anyone falling will be eliminated; only the first three give returns on bets.

If education is complex, integrated and subtle, surely our measures must also be complex, integrated and subtle. Within school, everyone is responsible for assessing what goes on, both in terms of our provision, and the children's development. White boards, stick it notes, scraps of paper, a rough file, samples of work, photos, video all go to make up the raw data that we use to build up a picture of the child. This information helps us to identify the child's stage of development and individual learning needs and enables us to plan effectively. The nature of the assessments is broad based. We don't use tick sheets or any equivalent, because we feel they don't give us enough information about the nature of the learning and they also have the effects of appearing to simplify the learning process.

It is important that we recognise the value of the whole range of pupils abilities and achievements. If assessment procedures are limited and narrow they work against inclusion.

Quote

There is a recognition too of the value of celebrating and capitalising on the enrichment of difference and diversity rather than the impoverishment of provision through the process of fitting it to a narrow set of artificially produced concepts of what is normal.

p181 The National Curriculum and Early Learning

Edited by Blenkin and Kelly.

This is of particular importance when a school, like ours, has children from a range of cultural backgrounds and where many children are learning more than one language. Our assessments and our provision must reflect our knowledge and understanding of the needs of these children adding another dimension to our work.

The following principles underpin our assessment procedures.

Our records include information from parents - this is an area we are trying to improve.

They include information from other professionals.

It is important that observations are over a period of time not one-off tests.

There is a focus on what the child **can** do.

They include observation and interaction with staff to whom the children can converse in their mother tongue.

They include the context within which the child is working.

The assessments are as much an assessment of our provision as they are of children's learning and development.

There are important links here with staff development - if staff are to observe effectively they must know what they are looking for and must also have the time to look. The children deserve this time - on my office door is engraved "you can put your hand in the river once, you cannot put your hand in the same river twice." [Heraclitis]

Children have only one chance and we need to be able to provide the right support and intervention at the right time.

Another Gardening analogy *P53 Children's rights*

Gardeners don't plant runner beans in January to get an earlier harvest than their neighbours; if they tried, they would get shrivelled and stunted beans. They fertilise the ground in the early months of the year, so that when the beans are planted - at the right time - they will flourish.

Oxfordshire County Council 1991.

In conclusion, I want to say again that, although I have talked about several aspects of our work separately, these aspects cannot be separated out in practice. They weave together to support our efforts to develop inclusive practices and need to be based on an inclusive policy and a collaborative approach agreed by all agencies.

Quote -Solihull

All children should be given the opportunity to grow, to play to socialise and to learn alongside their friends within their local community.

This can take place only where the philosophy and ethos permeate from the senior management and the elected members within an LEA to it's head teachers in order that the practitioners at the point of contact with the children are supported by the surrounding network.

I think this is also one of the key aspects of our provision - that we see it as integrated and flexible. Learning cannot be compartmentalised and whilst

children with special educational needs often need the steps of learning to be broken down- they still need to see the whole picture.

Learning for both adults and children is not an easy process, its very nature involves upsetting the status quo, altering the equilibrium, struggle. However, we will be rewarded by their sense of achievement when we are able to observe children as they play with, and wallow in, their new knowledge and skills.

And finally, an extract from the work of Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of the Reggio Emilia system of education and care in Italy.

The child has a hundred languages

[and a hundred, hundred, hundred more]

but we steal ninety nine...

...we tell the child

that work and play

reality and fantasy

science and imagination

sky and earth

reason and dream are things

that do not belong together.

If we can turn this around and at least attempt to provide for some of those hundred languages - we will go along way to meeting the needs of the children with whom we work.[There followed a description, by school staff, of our work with individual children with S.E.N.]

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